

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks at the Parallel Civil Society Summit in Moscow, Russia

July 7, 2009

Thank you very much. Thank you. Well, good afternoon. *Dobryi den'*. I apologize that, I think, I'm running late, and I'm leaving early. This is a good reason why civil society is so important, because you can't always count on politicians. [*Laughter*] It is a great pleasure to be with all of you. Through the work that you do, you underscore what I believe is a fundamental truth in the 21st century: That strong, vibrant nations include strong, vibrant civil societies.

This was also a key message of the speech that I gave this morning at the New Economic School. We not only need a reset button between the American and Russian Government, but we need a fresh start between our societies, more dialog, more listening, more cooperation in confronting common challenges. For history teaches us that real progress, whether it's economic or social or political, doesn't come from the top down. It typically comes from the bottom up. It comes from people; it comes from the grassroots; it comes from you. The best ideas and solutions come from ordinary citizens who become involved in their communities and in their countries. And by mobilizing and organizing and changing people's hearts and minds, you then change the political landscape. And oftentimes politicians get the credit for changing laws, but in fact, you've created the environment in which those new laws can occur.

I learned this myself when I worked as a community organizer in Chicago. I'm glad to see my friend here from Chicago, Calvin Holmes, who—we used to work together on a range of civic issues. I was working in communities that were devastated by steel plant closings, and so I went door to door, I worked with churches, trying to learn what people needed.

And we had a lot of setbacks. In fact, we had more failures than successes. But we kept on listening to the people; we learned from them; we got them involved. And over time, they chose projects to work on, whether it was building a new play lot or improving a neighborhood park or improving the local school or improving housing in the community. And slowly, block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood, you started to see change happen: more jobs, better housing, more opportunities for young people. And I learned a lesson, that if you want to bring about change, it's not enough just to be an advocate; it's not enough to just wait for the Government to act. You have to step up and deliver results, real impact on people's lives.

And that is something that I think is lost sometimes when we discuss civil society. There's a tendency sometimes for this to be a very abstract conversation with very lofty goals. And since I am a former law professor, I love abstractions and lofty goals. But your neighbor, your friend, your coworker, they're struggling with very immediate things right now: Can they pay the rent? Can their child go to a school that is going to teach them so that they can succeed in the future?

Those are the day-to-day struggles that they're wrestling with. And if they can't see a connection between what you are doing and their lives getting better in the short term, as well as the long term, then it's very hard to get any traction over time.

Now, no community is the same, and every country will follow its own path. So let me be very clear: Russia's future is up to the Russian people. Not every choice that's good for the United States is going to be good for Russia. Not every model of organization or development or democracy may be easily transplantable from one country to the next. But let me also say

that we can learn from each other, and I do think there's some universal principles. So I commend you for this summit, designed not to lecture, but to listen, as was already pointed out, not to teach or impose solutions, but to learn from each other, from the bottom up.

As today's speakers explained, there are so many opportunities for new partnerships: developing strong, prosperous communities; expanding education and exchanges that open young minds to each other's countries; promoting healthy lifestyles that help people live longer, more productive lives; discovering the clean energy technologies we need to protect our environment and confront climate change. These are the challenges that we can meet together.

And meeting these challenges, in turn, requires what many of you have dedicated your lives to sustaining a vibrant civil society: the freedom of people to live as they choose, to speak their minds, to organize peacefully, and to have a say in how they are governed; a free press to report the truth; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; a government that's accountable and transparent. And we honor all of you for the passion and perseverance that you bring to these causes.

As I've said elsewhere, I don't think these are American ideals, and I don't think they are the monopoly of one country. They're universal values; they're human rights. And that's why the United States of America will support them everywhere. That is our commitment, and that is our promise.

And in supporting these ideals, it's also important that we uphold them ourselves. And that's why I take the last speaker's admonition as a useful reminder that what we do matters, in part because although we know that sometimes we'll fall short of our ideals, when we do, they can be an excuse for others. Our journey to perfect our Union goes on to this day. And that's why I did order the closing of the Guantanamo Bay prison, and I did ban torture without equivocation and without exception.

Here in Russia, I welcome the steps that President Medvedev has taken so that civil society groups can play a more active role on behalf of the Russian people. And I want to acknowledge that we are joined today by representatives of two important organizations, the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman and the Presidential Commission on Human Rights and Civil Society.

Make no mistake: Civil society, civil groups, hold their governments to high standards. And I know, because this audience includes Americans who've been critical of me for not moving fast enough on issues that are of great importance. They've said it to my face in the Oval Office while I was President. *[Laughter]* They told me I was wrong. And in some cases they changed my mind; in some cases they didn't. And that's okay, because we're not going to agree on everything. But I know this: Their voices and their views and their criticism ultimately will make my decisions better. They will make me ask tougher questions and ask my staffs tougher questions. And we'll find out: Are there ways of doing what we need to do that conform to our deepest held values and our ideals and that are sustainable over the long term? That makes our country stronger in the long term, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

So this summit reminds us: The fresh starts have to be between more than just two Presidents. They have to be between our two peoples, our two societies. They have to be more than just common security, the cold war weapons we dismantle. It must be about our common opportunity, the future of progress and prosperity that we build together.

And I think that the leadership here in Russia, both civil and governmental, understand this. I had lunch with President Medvedev this afternoon, and we started talking about health

issues and the continuing high mortality rate among Russian men in particular. And we talked about alcoholism, and we talked about smoking. And we talked about the fact that government programs can be initiated, but to the extent that there's been success in the United States around reducing smoking levels, it's not only a matter of changing laws, it's also been changing attitudes, so that people feel that they need to change. And they internalize these different attitudes. That's something that civic society can do in a way that government never can. I then met the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, and he talked about how, you know, government exchanges are useful, but religious organizations, they can help melt away the suspicions and mistrust that have built between people over time.

So just in those two conversations, in the span of 15 minutes, essentially what I heard was a call for action from you. Confidence that what you are doing matters, even when sometimes it seems hard and it seems as if nobody is listening. That's what our work here on Earth must be about, what Tolstoy called the "sole meaning of life"—"to serve humanity." Now, thank you for making that cause the meaning of your lives. And good luck to all of you.

Spasibo.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:38 p.m. at the Metropol Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Calvin L. Holmes, executive director, Chicago Community Loan Fund; Yuri Dzhibladze, president, Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights; President Dmitry A. Medvedev of Russia; and His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia.

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